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I Don't Know what I'm Looking for but I'll Know it when I See it

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Abstract

The cultural geographer and philosopher David Harvey suggests that, like space and time, place is a social construct, and the only interesting question left to be asked on the subject is by what social process(es) is place constructed? This paper sets out to explore the construction methods employed by contemporary visual artists for whom place is central to their practice. Specific approaches are historically retraced revealing our understanding and desire to explore methods of representing place, and how this enquiry has influenced our renewed contemporary interest and understanding of place. It is not possible to separate any study of place from that of space, as both are intrinsically linked and are often interchangeable in literature and speech. It, therefore, becomes important to explore this relationship in some depth. The representation of place adheres to many social and political forces, which form it and continue to condition our understanding of place. If place functions as a manifestation of those associations, then by extension, the space experience of an artwork could be said to reside within the realm of place; space by virtue of our experience of it, of what we bring to it, is afforded the significance of place.

Through the study of particular artists and artworks such as Antony Gormley's, *Angel of the North* (Gateshead) and Jeremy Deller's, *Battle of Orgreave* (Sheffield), two similar in theme but very different approaches to place making and representation of place are considered. The paper also allows for thoughts to emerge and be tested on the role serendipity and sagacity has had on the formulation and reception of these works. Both artworks created a great deal of heated public debate at the time and continue to do so, and thus, have generated a great deal of community engagement that questions and interrogates the idea of place.

Key Words: Art, place, site, displacement, Deller, Orgreave, Gormley, Angel, assimilative, interruptive.

This paper takes the opportunity to explore what the cultural geographer and philosopher David Harvey suggests is the only interesting question that can be asked: "[B]y what social process(es) is place constructed?"¹ In considering the question 'by what means or processes is a sense of place created?', I've been asking and exploring the same or similar questions in my own work as a visual artist, and have been studying the work and practices of other artists for whom issues surrounding place have been central to their practice.

The title for the paper and chapter also refers to the observation and notion of not knowing at the same time as knowing. This statement may seem contradictory, but can refer to almost anything that involves decision-making combined with uncertainty, but with confidence in knowing one's own mind or taste. Short-term decisions can often be relatively difficult or even agonizing at times to make but we are safe and secure in the knowledge that a bad decision can be relatively short lived. Decisions that have a more long-term legacy, possibly affecting generations to come such as high-profile public art commissions in the landscape. Public art commissions are often site-specific taking references from the location, region or place either social, historical or political in nature or site-sensitive evoking deep rooted feelings of belonging and identity. The two projects that are to be considered here have also affected how a community is perceived from the outside and more importantly how that community see themselves.

Art projects in the UK that involve a community in some way often spearhead a regeneration project and can help to strengthen an existing identity or help formulated a completely new identity for a community. This approach requires a great deal of sensitivity and ingenuity. Much has been learnt from Richard Serra's '*Tilted Arc*' (1981-89) and one only needs to recall the infamous and controversial '*House*' project by Rachael Whiteread from 1993 that was torn down only months after completion due to public unrest. The growing power of public opinion would appear to be paramount and essential in a successful commission. The immediate stake holders seem to slowly and suspiciously accept the intervention followed quickly by adoption of the work or in the case of '*House*' don't accept and very quickly reject the work regardless of the artists international standing and reputation in the art world.

For the purpose of this conference and paper, I've concentrated my attention on two specific examples of contemporary art practice that should be familiar to most (one possibly more than the other). I address the broad spectrum of the conference, covering disciplines of urban/human geography, history, politics, philosophy and anthropology. By considering Antony Gormley's *Angel of the North* (Gateshead, 1998) and Jeremy Deller's *Battle of Orgreave* (Sheffield, 2001), I explore methods of constructing a sense of place. The two artworks are similar in theme, both dealing with a location that has a strong sense of place within the local community, but adopting very different approaches. I will raise issues concerning place making and the representations of place that have been adopted in the realisation of the works. In order to best understand how and why these artists have responded to the context in the way they have, it is important to historically retrace these approaches, revealing our understanding and desire to explore methods of representing place and how this enquiry has influenced our renewed contemporary interest and understanding of place. It is not possible to separate any study of place

from that of space as both are intrinsically linked and are often interchangeable in literature and speech. It, therefore, becomes important to explore this relationship in some depth. The representation of place adheres to many social and political forces, which form it and continue to condition our understanding of it. If place functions as a manifestation of those associations, then by extension, the space experience of an artwork could be said to reside within the realm of place; space by virtue of our experience of it, of what we bring to it, is afforded the significance of place.

It is possible to trace both artists' influences from a previous generation of artists and art practices from the 1960s through the 70s and into the 80s. The work of Richard Serra, Robert Smithson, Hans Haacke or Michael Asher and aspects of the art movements of minimalism, conceptualism, earthworks and institutional critique are all detectable in their practices. *The Angel of the North* and *The Battle of Orgreave* cited here arguably fall under the term site-specific art. Alternative terminology that captures these approaches to practice have also been called context-specific, debate-specific, audience-specific, community-specific, project based, and public art.



Image 1 – Battle of Orgreave by Andrew Sneddon after Jeremy Deller, 2001.

This paper sets out to chart the historical significance of the notion of place and its changing influence on the production and displacement of the art object within contemporary art practice. The contemporary artist would appear to share an investment and interest towards an understanding of how place might influence our emotions and actions with other disciplines. Disciplines such as Architecture, Philosophy, Geography, Anthropology and Sociology all share an interest towards

answering the question 'What is place?' and 'How can an understanding of it inform specific practices?'

Place can present as a fairly common word within language, and in our everyday lives most would feel comfortable in its use and meaning. However, what at first seems a benign and straight-forward noun quickly becomes multi-purpose and multi-layered and the subject of philosophical debates across many disciplines. The philosopher Edward Casey asks us to imagine what it would be like if there were no places in the world and suggests that "our lives are so place-orientated and place-saturated that we cannot begin to comprehend, much less face up to, what sheer placelessness would be like".² This psychoanalytic language and thinking encourages *fear of the void* and by extension inspires anxiety and repression, which may present a key factor in attracting much attention to the subject. This is further emphasised by the geographer Edward Relph in considering the importance and need to constantly maintain an understanding of place:

But there is nevertheless a real problem in this lack of formal knowledge of place. If places are indeed a fundamental aspect of man's existence in the world, if they are sources of security and identity for individuals and groups of people, then it is important that the means of expressing, creating, and maintaining significant places are not lost. Moreover there are many signs that these very means are disappearing and that 'placeslessness' – the weakening of distinct and diverse experiences and identities of places- is now a dominant force.³

I would like to pick up on Relph's use of terms such as 'expressing' and 'creating' and to add these to one of the four areas outlined for further study and development in David Harvey's *The Condition of Postmodernity*. The list also features in an essay from 1993, *From space to place and back again: Reflections on the condition of postmodernity*.⁴

A recognition that the production of images and of discourses is an important facet of activity that has to be analysed as part and parcel of the reproduction and transformation of any symbolic order. Aesthetic and cultural practices matter, and the conditions of their production deserve the closest attention.⁵

Any attempt to clarify or pin down 'what place is' is automatically met with a barrage of conflicting words and meanings, often contradictory in nature. How can place be both village and city, home and nation at the same time? There seems little doubt that the term place is a contested site. The immense confusion of meaning makes any theoretical concept of place immediately suspect.⁶

In the introduction to *Place*, Tacita Dean and Jeremy Millar suggest that ‘place’ is to landscape as ‘identity’ is to portraiture’.⁷ This provides us with a significantly simple but practical suggestion as to why place is of importance to the contemporary artists. The importance and attraction of place for the contemporary artist would appear to be a natural extension of the traditions and conventions from landscape painting. This suggestion is developed further into the consideration of place as being the ‘projection of history onto landscape’.⁸

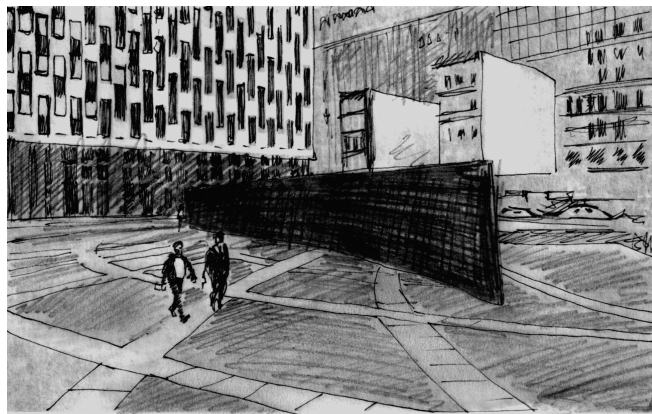


Image 2 – Tilted Arc by Andrew Sneddon after Richard Serra, 1981.

Contemporary practices as explored by visual artists are no longer restricted by conventions of strict representation or topographical pictorial accuracy. Concepts of place and context have continued the legacy of the landscape tradition and this legacy can be traced back to the 1960s where we have a great number of artists and art movements such as Conceptual Art, Minimalism, Land Art and Performance beginning to articulate new thinking about practice.

The more successful work from the minimal syndrome rejected itself, allowing the viewer a one-to-one confrontation with pure limit or bounds. This displacement or sensory pressures from object to place will prove to be the major contribution of minimalist art. – Dennis Oppenheim, 1969.⁹

The displacement of the art object often refers to the questioning and removal of the object away from the dominant authority of the gallery or museum towards alternative and usually oppositional spaces. The gallery/museum as sole context has habitually determined the final destination of the artwork and has had equal say in determining its final definition of form and shape. A more pluralistic and critical questioning of the environment in which the viewer is confronted by or invited to

discover the work began to emerge in the 1960's and seems to have influenced a generation of artists and cultural thinkers about the production and meditation of contemporary art practice. This period can also be seen as the birth of the participating viewer and the beginning of the demise of the passive viewer.

In order to fully appreciate the current context of place and the contemporary artwork and its not too distant forefathers, it would be beneficial to undertake a review of the history of place and its relation to space by a close analysis of two contemporary key thinkers on the subject. Both David Harvey and Edward Casey have written on this history with the aim of creating an awareness that helps us understand the significance of key attitudes and how these attitudes have influenced our contemporary views on the subject with particular emphasis paid to the visual arts.

Antony Gormley's *Angel of the North* was installed on a hillside on the south side of Gateshead on 15th February 1998, greeting road traffic on the A1 and rail commuters on the east coast line, the main transport artery of networks connecting Scotland and the North of England to the south and rest of the UK and beyond. It was conceived as a landmark sculpture to mark the approach into Gateshead, and its placement on the site of the former Teams Colliery baths was decided very early in the process. This area had been mined from the 1720s until production ceased in the late 1960's. Gormley described the location for the sculpture:

The lower Team Valley is not an idealised landscape, it is a working place where agriculture, farming, light industry, road, rail, terraced housing and flats, open ground and football fields contribute to its character. I hope that the work will add something to this diversity of activities, not dominating but working with the scale and robustness of the marshalling yards, the motorway, the valley itself and the multiplicity of its human uses.¹⁰

The sculpture is considered to have achieved its goals of creating a positive impact on social exclusion issues, creating civic pride, regeneration of the local economy and improving the general quality of the region to inward investors. At the cost of £800,000 much of this support was allocated by the Arts Council Lottery fund (£584, 000), the European Regional Development Fund (£150,000), Northern Arts (£45,000) and the shortfall was found by local business sponsorship. In return, according to Gateshead Council, this public art project is credited with being the catalyst in creating an estimated £600m of urban development for the region. This would include the £22m Gateshead Millennium Bridge, linking Gateshead to the Newcastle Quayside, which opened in 2001, The Baltic: Centre for Contemporary Art which opened its doors in 2002, and the £70m Sage Gateshead music centre by Sir Norman Foster & Partners, which opened in 2004.

Along with audience viewing figures or the number of people *seeing it in passing* from the road and railway is believed to be in the region of 90,000 people every day, which is more than one person every second or 33 million people every year. In addition Gateshead Quays is one of the largest urban regeneration programmes in Europe, and it is now acknowledged that these developments would not have progressed without the catalyst of major art projects, for example, the *Angel of the North*. It's difficult to argue that the *Angel of the North* is not a runaway success story and a credit to all involved in the project. It is now recognised as an icon and symbol of regeneration, both regionally and nationally with many visitors from overseas wanting to know how the Gateshead Council achieved this success.

Almost eight years of planning, fundraising and outreach educational programmes, artists' talks and public debate combined with media coverage have contributed to the project's success and an increased awareness of place and a renewed attachment to the locale by locals. The education program that ran throughout the whole process involved around 1400 school children and has secured an understanding and appreciation for generations to come. A further unplanned but nevertheless significant happening occurred on 13 May 1998 when the Angel was draped in a 9-metre long replica of Alan Shearer's Newcastle United No. 9 football shirt during United's appearance in the 1998 FA Cup Final.



Image 3 – Angel of the North by Andrew Sneddon after Antony Gormley, 1998.

This single event could be recognised as an acceptance of the contemporary artwork by the local community. An acceptance that wasn't always present. In the early stages of the project the projected cost was a big concern and considered by the majority of locals as being too expensive, with the monies being better spent directly on social projects such as housing, hospitals or job creation. But, as the

project neared completion, it was understood that the funding could not have been transferred, and no local taxes were spent on the sculpture.

As a model for public art and constructing a sense of place it is fairly robust and could serve as a model or benchmark for other councils and arts organisations. One only need think of Juame Plensa's *Dream* from 2009, set high on top of Sutton Manor Colliery near St Helens and again overlooking the busy M62 or Mark Wallinger's monumental sculpture of a lifelike white horse which will sit next to the A2 in Kent near Ebbsfleet, which over the next 25 years is due to see regeneration in the shape of more than 10,000 new homes. The landmark will be visible to travellers as they pull out of Ebbsfleet International train station bound for the continent, and to motorists as they drive to and from Dover. This could become Britain's largest piece of public sculpture. At a projected cost of £2m, (which will no doubt rise), it will be more than twice as expensive as Antony Gormley's *Angel of the North*, and at 50 meters, it will be well over double the angel's height. At the time of writing this paper another piece of public art has been announced for the border crossing between England and Scotland. Cecil Balmond's design, the *Caledonian Star* is set to sit near the small border town of Gretna overlooking the M74 and again will have estimated viewing figures of 10 million every year.

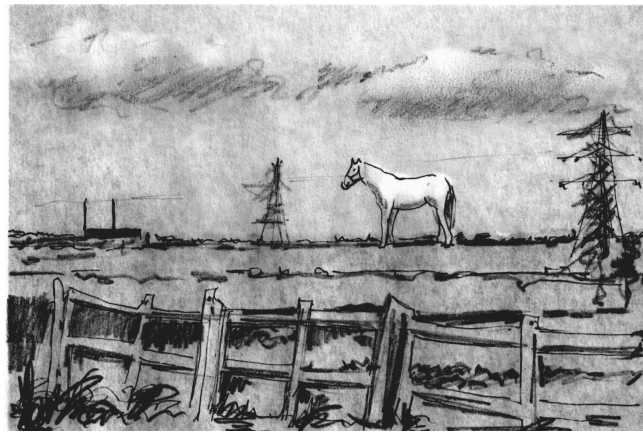


Image 4 – The Ebbsfleet Landmark by Andrew Sneddon, after Mark Wallinger, 2011.

As an alternative to these monumental 'signpost' pieces of sculpture that herald regeneration projects and symbolise a community's new sense of place, there is Jeremy Deller's *Battle of Orgreave* from 2001 that provides a meaningful but uncomfortable artwork that reconstructs a sense of place and time. The *Battle of Orgreave* was conceived by Jeremy Deller, commissioned and produced by

Artangel in association with Channel 4 and is a re-enactment of a decisive day of the miners strike.

On 18th June 1984 I was watching the evening news and saw footage of a mass picket at Orgreave coking plant in South Yorkshire in which thousands of men were chased up a field by mounted police. The image of this pursuit stuck in my mind for years I wanted to find out what exactly happened on that day with a view to re-enacting or commemorating it in some way. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the strike, like a civil war, had a traumatically divisive effect at all levels of life in the UK.¹¹

Deller's work exists as a re-enactment, a book (*The English Civil War Part II*) and a DVD, which largely follows a documentary genre with interviews with miners, policeman and politicians combined with archive footage from 1984 and behind the scene footage of the re-enactment. Due to the sensitive nature of work and its potential to re-open old wounds as the event being constructed was in 'living memory', Deller and Artangel were prepared to call a halt to the project if local people felt hostility or antagonism towards the project or found it to be in bad taste. No such problem ever materialised, but the communities affected by the re-enactment appreciated the opportunity to re-tell events, to correct media coverage of the events of 1984 and to remember without falling into nostalgia.

In considering both artists' approaches with regard to constructing a sense of place through the work that they have made, I initially felt that one approach was better than the other but can see now that both are important in their own way and whether they are assimilative or interruptive¹² in nature, they are important in understanding how a sense of place is constructed

Notes

¹David Harvey, et al., *Mapping The Futures, Local Cultures, Global Change* (London: Routledge, 1993), 5.

²Edward Casey, *Getting Back into Place, Toward a Renewed Understanding of the Place-World* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), ix.

³Edward Relph, *Place and Placelessness*, (London: Pion Limited, 1986), 6.

⁴David Harvey, *Mapping the Futures, Local Cultures, Global Change*, (London: Routledge, 1993), 3.

⁵David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford/Mass: Blackwell 1990), 355.

⁶Ibid., 4.

⁷ Jeremy Millar and Tacita Dean (eds.), *Artworks: Place* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2005) 12.

⁸ Comments from a lecture and discussion delivered by Jeremy Millar at Sheffield Hallam University and further expanded in the accompanying publication *Transmission*: Host, Guest Jeremy Millar, Host Andrew Sneddon, 2008.

⁹ Lucy R. Lippard, *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, (California: University of California Press, 1997) xxi.

¹⁰ *The Angel of the North*, Public Art Team, Gateshead Council, July 2006, Viewed 15th July 2011, <http://www.gateshead.gov.uk/Leisure%20and%20Culture/attractions/Angel/Home.aspx>

¹¹ Jeremy Deller, Forward to *The English Civil War Part II: Personal Accounts of the 1984-85 Miners Strike*, (London: Artangel, 2001)

¹² Miwon Kwon, *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Locational Identity*, (Cambridge and London; MIT Press, 2004) 11.

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